

# Coleccion Aruba, Inter-sectoral Collaboration on Aruba as a Model for the (Dutch) Caribbean: A collaborative approach for preservation and access of collections in Small Island States <sup>(1)</sup>

*Raymond. R. Hernandez*

National Archives Aruba

*J. Peter. Scholing*

National Library Aruba

Instead of separate papers regarding the (theoretical) benefits of inter-island collaboration between organizations in each specific field of expertise, we have chosen to write a joint paper in which we promote intersectoral collaboration, both *intra-insular* (on each island) and *inter-insular* (between the islands) as an alternative to single-focus, *intra*-sectoral collaboration proposed by the working group for the topic of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean and commemoration thereof.

Not only we have made big steps in Aruba to conserve and provide access to documentary and cultural heritage materials, but we also stimulate historical research, cultural education and productions, and at the same time mitigate constraints and challenges present in many small island societies, by making a series of conscious decisions of the actors/institutions to stop acting as “islands within islands” and join forces, not only for the sole topic/occasion of the “year of the commemoration of the abolition of slavery” but in a much wider and more permanent setting, resulting not only in the “Coleccion Aruba” <sup>(2)</sup> digital cultural heritage portal, but in many cross-sectoral collaborations and spin-off projects, making information about Aruba’s history, heritage and culture available in households, schools and (research) institutions in Aruba and beyond.

## **Coleccion Aruba as a model for collaboration for sustainable access ... and beyond**

The idea of providing access to Aruba’s documentary and cultural heritage materials by way of digitization and providing digital access started way before the COVID pandemic and well before there was talk of commemorating the abolition of slavery in the Dutch West Indian colonies, 160 years before, in 1863. Both of Aruba’s documentary heritage institutions had been digitizing their materials for over a decade before the start of the “Coleccion Aruba” initiative.

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution is an abstract of the paper about inter-sectoral collaboration we practice in Aruba. The full version can be found on our Coleccion Aruba page: <https://coleccion.aw/show/?ANA-BNA-DIG-PAPER-HERNANDEZ-SCHOLING-FULL-SEPTEMBER-2023>

<sup>2</sup> <https://coleccion.aw>

Biblioteca Nacional Aruba (BNA), launched its own digital collection, the “BNA Coleccion Digital”<sup>(3)</sup> in March of 2019, built on the infrastructure of the Internet Archive<sup>(4)</sup>, as part of an effort to make the vast wealth of its digitized and born-digital materials available in a centralized and more manageable manner than before, and being less dependent on external parties for the day-to-day management of its digital assets.



















Whereas in the past, the sources could only be physically consulted on Aruba, nowadays these are available online, where even during the pandemic, a “yiu di tera” (“country child”) studying in the Netherlands, could quietly write his thesis in the Netherlands. In March 2022 the Archivo Nacional Aruba (ANA) followed suit by launching portions of its collections as a parallel collection to BNA’s digital collection, also by using the Internet Archive’s infrastructure.

In October of 2022 ANA and BNA, both government institutions, joined forces with a third Aruban institution, the cultural foundation Union di Organisacionnan Cultural Arubano (UNOCA), signed a Memorandum of Understanding to formalize their collaboration focusing on making their joint collections, available online, without limitations, via a single portal, the “Coleccion Aruba” platform, available at <https://coleccion.aw>. Due to the open and collaborative nature, and “low cost, high impact” aspects it has the potential to become a model for cultural heritage initiatives in Small Island Developing States and (other) remote areas, highlighting the importance of partnerships and community engagement in promoting sustainable development and cultural preservation. The project has also facilitated the development of partnerships with local institutions and communities, who have been actively involved in documenting and preserving their cultural traditions. These partnerships by now are extending beyond the boundaries of the island nation of Aruba to the wider Dutch Kingdom and hopefully to that of the Caribbean region as the next logical step.



<sup>3</sup> <https://digital.bna.aw>, now also available within the Coleccion Aruba platform: <https://coleccion.aw/bna>.

<sup>4</sup> The Internet Archive is an American digital library founded on May 10, 1996, providing free access to collections of digitized materials including websites, software applications, music, audiovisual and print materials. <https://archive.org>.

Institucionnan Partner	Contenido	Cu sosten di
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Archivo Nacional Aruba</li> <li> Biblioteca Nacional Aruba</li> <li> UNOCA</li> <li> Museo Arkeologico Nacional Aruba</li> <li> Stichting Monumentenfonds Aruba</li> <li> TeleAruba</li> <li> Plantage Zorg en Hoop (NL)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Home</li> <li> Browse all collections</li> <li> Browse all texts/documents</li> <li> Browse all images</li> <li> Browse all videos</li> <li> Browse all audio</li> <li> Latest additions</li> </ul>	     
<b>Institucionnan cu a contribui cu contenido</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NL)</li> <li> Koninklijke Bibliotheek (NL)</li> <li> Nationaal Archief (NL)</li> <li> Stedsmuseum Tilburg / Erfters van Tilburg (NL)</li> <li> Koninklijke Verzamelingen (NL)</li> <li> Algemene Rekenkamer Aruba</li> </ul>	<small>coleccion aw - Un solo portal pa e herencia documental y audiovisual di Aruba. Mas informacion/bira partner: <a href="mailto:Tuma.contacto@cu.naa">Tuma.contacto@cu.naa</a></small>	

## The limitations of our Caribbean reality: The driving force in the search for viable solutions

Amid all this, we must recognize the reality of small island states, e.g. the Caribbean. We were often told, and we tend to accept this as “our inconvenient truth”, that we as small states don’t have the potential to come up with (sustainable) solutions and have to look out for solutions from “the big guys” or “mother country”.

Our Caribbean reality includes the facts of our colonial past (our history and heritage) and of small-scale economies (our limitation), that we must deal with. While the first one regards our mindset (and the mindset of those at “the center”), the second one has more to do with the consequences of our small scale.

Therefore, it is important to decolonize our minds regarding the way experts, scientists, and high officials, and big institutions in the perceived “center of power” (in our case the Netherlands/The Hague), tell us when or how to implement solutions in the Caribbean, often based on unequal power relations, combined with insufficient knowledge on the existing local state of affairs, and levels of innovation and technological ingenuity. Oftentimes these “solutions” resulted in the creation of skewed and dependent relations, followed by the running out of resources over time or the pullback of support from abroad, leaving just a white elephant the island could not take care of. It’s time for us to seek for ourselves the best sustainable solutions according to the Caribbean reality.

We must believe that we are also capable of proposing solutions that are viable and custom-made to our own Caribbean reality. We must realize we can ensure a breakthrough ourselves, by breaking with “what the past has created for us” and breaking with dependent or one-way relationships within the Kingdom, which the proponents of the dependency theory (amidst our boundaries and abroad) tell us and is present in all aspects of our (professional) life, including our field of work.

The resources become more limited if we consider the recent natural disasters in the area and the ongoing climate changes for which the UN(ESCO) advocates for actions to be taken to safeguard our (in)tangible cultural heritage. The pandemic has shown us how vulnerable small states like ours can be. The implications were all the worse at the micro level, as in the situation of our institutions they are considered as not vital or non-essential. Cuts in resources and, in some cases, staff followed, restricting as a result the provision of services/information to the public.

That's why we must recognize that cooperation and mutual assistance are the driving forces for our survival and progress. In our case constraints breed creativity. We focused on mutual assistance and inter-institutional cooperation, instead of a costly contract with an international commercial services provider, oftentimes financed by (single-source) funding or "aid" exclusively from the "mother country", which we experience as contra-productive and is contrary to the concepts of organizational and digital durability and often leads to stagnation or termination of these problems in the long run when initial funding runs out and projects need to be fully carried out and executed by the island institutions themselves.

The shared vision that we coin the "Aruba Model" is based on a generational policy, according to which the interests of future generations must be considered in our actions in the present (Wetenschappelijke Raad, 1999). We have a duty to ensure that what we produce today (including digitally) is transferred sustainably to future generations. At the time of writing this paper, the joint *Coleccion Aruba* has reached a total of over 75.000 individual items, totaling nearly a million pages of text, of which over half is in Papiamentu, making *Coleccion.aw* the largest online text corpus for the Papiamentu language.

What started as a collaboration of a digital nature now extends to the physical preservation level of our cultural heritage. Sustainable preservation of our physical cultural and historical heritage is also important. That's why we strongly advocate for the realization of a joint cultural heritage center as well, to safeguard our analog and physical heritage materials and to further centralize and optimize shared (digitization and preservation) resources and efforts. This additional focus on the importance of preserving the original, physical, records as well was also emphasized by the Dutch member of Parliament Renske Leijten in her motion during the debate on slavery in January 2023 <sup>(5)</sup>.

Most of the time as institutions we tend to act like islands. That is why we must stop being islands on an island. We must change our way of thinking and our way of doing business, to survive in this rapidly changing world, due to the technological and information development, as well as the climatological challenges we face as island nations. We must set our mindset to a more collaborative one, not only on a national level but also on a regional level.

### **Coleccion Aruba as a model for thematic and project-based collaboration: the slavery case**

As was the case with being "prepared" for the COVID pandemic, other strategic decisions taken in 2019 and the years before made that, when the announcement was made by the Dutch government that there would be a "commemoration year for the abolition of slavery in the Kingdom of the Netherlands" taking place in 2023 and 2024, we in Aruba were in a sense on the right track to provide as much information as possible online about the theme of the past of slavery.

An interesting example of this came in the form of a new technology, which when it was launched publicly had the potential to become the "key" to unlock archival and documentary

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<sup>5</sup> Gewijzigde motie Leijten (31 Januari 2023). <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/moties/detail?id=2023Z01348&did=2023D03168>

heritage around the world. But unlike earlier technologies which were dependent on large investments and only being within the reach of the “big” institutions with deep pockets, mostly in Europe and the United States, this technology also became available to innovation-savvy institutions in small island nations at the same time. In 2019 an Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based technology for handwritten text recognition (HTR) called “Transkribus” was released publicly, promising to do what OCR had done for printed texts, and what search engines had done for the Internet: make historical documents and archival collections available on a full-text basis, word for word.

In the fall of 2019, along with the “big” institutions anywhere else in the world, Aruba was (one of) the first in the region to recognize the implications of this new technology, especially for manuscripts and archival holdings. This was a great breakthrough, because this meant that we could transcribe all our handwritten archives via this new HTR technology that was as readily available to small island institutions as it was to the “traditional” first-adopters of technologies elsewhere.

### **Digitization of Slavery (Re)sources: making the Colonial Archive of Aruba accessible online**

During the COVID lockdown, demand for information in a digital format grew. Memory institutions like libraries and archives was expected to continue to keep providing information during their physical closure, information being available in a digital form becoming the norm.

BNA made all of their digital-born newspapers and local books written in Papiamentu available online, for use during the (virtual) final exams while schools were still closed<sup>(6)</sup>, while ANA made the first steps to make the colonial archive of Aruba accessible with the new HTR technology, actively seeking funding to make this a reality.

With the support of Foundation Friends of the Archive and other co-funding organizations, the ANA was able to launch a project called “Restaureren, digitaliseren en digitaal toegankelijk maken van het archief van de Arubaanse Commandeurs en Gezaghebber over de periode 1816 – 1939 (1945)”.

The ‘Aruba Colonial Archives Project’ is not only meant to make these handwritten documents from the colonial period digitally accessible and available but also to make them searchable with the main purpose of making new information available and possibly adding a new dimension to our knowledge or understanding of Aruban history, including the slavery past. This archive consists mostly of handwritten documents, which are difficult to read, due to the discoloration of the paper, but also because it requires a certain skill from the reader to read the handwritten texts (dissecting the handwriting).

Through this project, we have been able to bring new light on unenlightened aspects of our history, like slavery history. So, we can talk about rewriting our own history. When we get

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<sup>6</sup> “When An Island Shuts Down: Aruba & the National Emergency Library” (May 2020). <https://blog.archive.org/2020/05/18/when-an-island-shuts-down-aruba-the-national-emergency-library/>

our already digitized colonial archives at the National Archives in the Netherlands, we can, even after applying the HTR application, begin to better describe our (shared) history.

As part of the 160th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Kingdom, ANA has also planned to complete the archives up to 1875 before the end of 2023 and make them available online. With the generous contribution of the Dutch National Archives, we have begun to receive the “Aruban” sections of the colonial records held in the Hague and will receive the pre-1828 colonial records soon as well, once they have also been digitized.



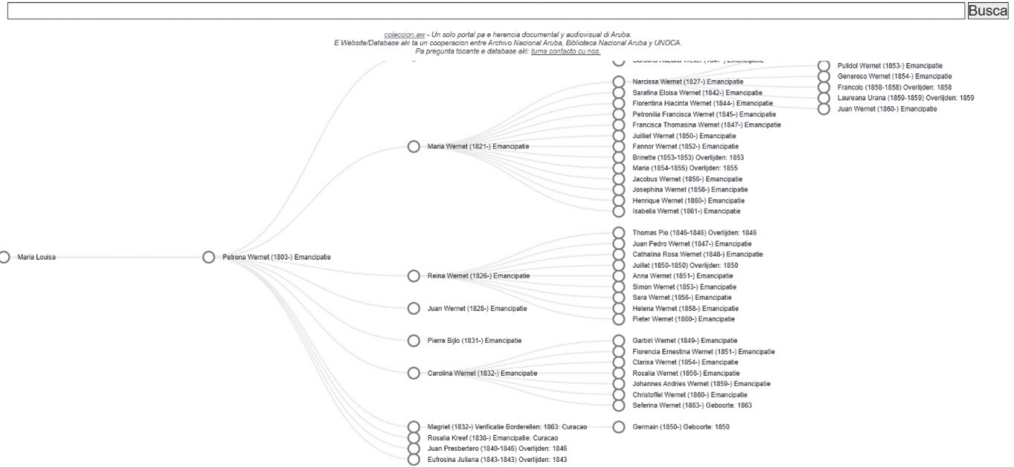
In cooperation with the Internet Archive, the manuscripts on Coleccion Aruba are among the first in the world to become available by means of an integrated full-text search, because of the application of Artificial Intelligence, and as a result of a small island nation’s agility and sense of collaboration.

Most of the memory institutions around the world, even after putting a lot of resources available to implement HTR technology, have still not been able to make the results of this available to their users online. Meanwhile, the documents already uploaded to Coleccion Aruba are also used by Dutch researchers (for example of the Radboud University) in compiling the database of the enslaved people within the Dutch colonies, with the Aruba part being launched June 30, 2023.

Furthermore, a more advanced representation of the “Aruban slaves” not only shows how they appear in the registers but transforms this information in order to display their “life stories” and their family relations (where known) on Aruba and across the islands, based on the same original dataset developed in cooperation with Radboud University, is already being planned and tested.



Coleccion Aruba • Database di Personanan Sclov/isa na Aruba, 1840-1863 • Stomboom di Matriarco: Maria Louisa



## Conclusion

The *Aruba Model* can easily be applied within the Dutch Caribbean, and the whole Kingdom, sharing a common history and thus a common heritage. All of the aforementioned projects are “repeatable” and have proved themselves already. We hope that other projects to digitize other colonial archives within this framework are possible in cooperation with other memory institutions in the Kingdom, linking these important collections to other relevant historical and cultural (re)resources contributed by institutions on each island and connected between islands.

The current state of inter-island collaboration, in the field of archives and libraries is mostly incidental. Using the *Aruba Model* as a best practice, we suggest that this same kind of action can be taken in the other parts of the Dutch Caribbean to create cooperation, within the island boundaries and beyond. This means that each Dutch Caribbean entity can develop a network to provide each other with the necessary assistance. And in a wider Dutch Caribbean scope, the entities of the Dutch Caribbean can assist each other with their expertise and experience, so we don’t have to reinvent the wheel again and again. Joint projects can be presented taking into account the limited resources that are available for the heritage sector as a whole. We think that the technical platform and model chosen by the joint Aruba partners can serve as a good start for this collaboration, and Aruba is ready to support the other islands and their institutions interested in following this model. This model is not a formally centralized one, but a networking model between institutions built to complement each other’s strengths. Each participating organization is responsible for its own collections and resources, while everyone can access and use the information they need for their research and look to each other for support.

We don't have to waste time theorizing how to cooperate, looking only at a specific field of expertise, sector, or institution. The creation of this collaborative platform is part of the digital culture era (or e-culture) that is evolving. Initiate cooperation right away and/or build upon existing ones. First on your own islands, with other heritage memory and cultural organizations, then between islands.

We want to emphasize that although this model might read as a proposal for a digital platform, there is still the need for the safeguarding of the analog material itself. Aruba does not have a suitable repository in place for archival documents, valuable documentary collections, or other audiovisual items, museum objects, artifacts, and AV-materials. That is why we keep emphasizing the need for a joint depository, which is also highlighted in the "Pleidooi/Plea" document as well as in the January 2023 resolution by Leijten et al. Fifty years from now, researchers will still in need of information, and that is why the need to safeguard our cultural and historical heritage.

Given our experiences, we are willing to share our acquired knowledge and experiences with our Caribbean peers, starting within the former Netherlands Antilles.

### **Reference**

Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (1999). *Generatiebewust Beleid*. Den Haag: WRR.